

EDITORIALS

Assessing primary results in Montgomery and Prince George's counties

Friday, September 17, 2010

IN ADDITION to the heartening victory of [Rushern L. Baker III](#) in the Democratic primary for Prince George's county executive, there was other good news from the results in the Maryland suburbs on Tuesday. There were also developments that were less salutary, and even ugly. We'll start on a positive note.

The good. Among the most surprising and encouraging outcomes in the Democratic primaries was the defeat of longtime state [Sen. Nathaniel Exum in Prince George's](#). Mr. Exum has been a legislator for a quarter century, both in the House of Delegates and the Senate. Nonetheless, he has no important leadership role, because he is widely regarded as one of the most divisive and unsavory figures in the legislature, an obstructionist who wields the race card as a cudgel. His defeat by [Del. Joanne C. Benson](#), a 20-year veteran of the House, is terrific news.

The bad. Possibly the most shocking and dispiriting result from the Maryland primaries was the miserable turnout in Montgomery County, long a bastion of civic and electoral engagement. Just 18.6 percent of eligible voters went to the polls; by a huge margin, that's the lowest turnout in any primary or general election in the county since at least 1976. (Older data were not readily available.)

That means fewer than 1 in 5 voters participated in selecting the candidates who will set property taxes, determine school budgets and shape road and rail networks. And because Montgomery has sadly become virtually a one-party state, the real number of citizens whose votes actually counted (i.e. Democratic primary voters) was just 77,000, or 14 percent of the county's 569,000 registered voters. That's sad.

The causes for the paltry turnout are varied and open to speculation; they might include the absence of tight races for governor, Congress or county executive. But the effect is reasonably clear. The fewer the voters, the greater the influence for special interests that mobilize most skillfully and spend most heavily. In Montgomery, that means unions representing teachers and other public employees.

The unions are certainly entitled to push their chosen candidates. The problem in Montgomery is that with no effective countervailing forces, elected officials will be reluctant or even fearful about refusing the unions' contractual demands, no matter how outlandish or unaffordable.

Which brings us to: *The ugly.* For Montgomery's unions, the priority was to defeat County Council member Duchy Trachtenberg, who had the nerve to challenge pay and benefits for county workers that were beyond the county's means. Ms. Trachtenberg was targeted, smeared and [defeated](#), as a boastful primary night [text message from John](#)

[Sparks](#), head of the county firefighters union, made clear: "It was the Unions that put Duchy in office [and] it was the Unions that took her out. Justice served!"

The smear consisted of a bogus complaint about unsubstantiated irregularities stemming from her brief tenure as treasurer of the Maryland chapter of the National Organization of Women four years ago. The police union shamelessly seized on the allegations and requested an investigation from the state attorney general, who naturally ignored the matter as the election stunt it was. Such is the unseemliness of union clout in Montgomery politics.